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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 001098

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN; DRL

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [KDEM](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: TOUCHING BASE WITH RELIGIOUS  
MINORITY GROUPS

Classified By: Charge Sylvia Reed Curran for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: During a routine embassy religious roundtable meeting on August 19, members of seven minority religious groups in Turkmenistan -- representing both registered and unregistered religious groups -- generally noted that their situation is improving, even though a number of complaints remain. All concurred that officials from the Council on Religious Affairs (CRA) continue to be sensitive about ethnic Turkmen becoming members of Christian churches. At the same time, however, they also stated that more ethnic Turkmen are expressing interest in their groups than in the past. Access to religious materials remains a problem. The leader of the Greater Grace Church in Mary reported an incident in which a member of an Azerbaijani delegation visiting Ashgabat was deported after attending a service. A Jehovah's Witness leader also suggested that the CRA might obstruct the group's effort to register because of its position on public proselytization. Balancing this out, however, these religious leaders also reported that several church members have won court cases brought against local authorities for discrimination on the grounds of religion. One registered church has reported that it has been able to find common ground with the Ministry of Justice which has helped to overcome some longstanding problems, including efforts to gain permission for foreign visitors. All in all, while there continue to be complaints, they appear to be qualitatively different than that just a few years ago. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Poloff met with a small group of minority religious group representatives on August 19 to see how they have been faring. The churches represented at the roundtable were the Jehovah's Witnesses, Light of Life Church in Abadan, Light to the World Pentecostal Church in Mary, Light of the East Church in Dashoguz, the New Apostolic Church, Greater Grace Church, and the Full Gospel Christian Church. Four are registered, one appears to be in the final stage of review of its application with the Ministry of Justice, one is waiting for its sister church to be registered before beginning its process, and one planned to submit its registration application documents the following day. All have had regular interaction with the Council on Religious Affairs (CRA) seeking assistance on registration issues.

13. (C) Two of the registered groups reported trouble overcoming the government's administrative hurdles in getting a legal address registered. They noted that once the churches were registered, a new process began in which they again had to submit a package of documents to acquire legal address registration. One church registered in 2005 has been trying to register a legal address since then. Another lost its legal address registration when the church's leader immigrated to Russia, and his apartment could no longer be the church's official address.

14. (C) The religious leaders all reported varied experiences in interacting with the CRA. All indicated that when they sought assistance from the CRA on various issues, they always met with Deputy Council Chairman Nurmammed Gurbanov himself. Some said that he was a much more cooperative and respectful interlocutor than previous officials with whom they had met. However, some representatives, notably ethnic Turkmen representing Christian groups, stated that Gurbanov was friendly with them until he learned that they were Christians. His demeanor then changed, and he became aloof and much less receptive to the representatives' requests.

15. (C) All the leaders shared the opinion that more ethnic Turkmen are expressing interest in their groups than in the past and are less afraid to do so. However, they also noted that both the CRA in Ashgabat as well as provincial officials continue to harbor the notion that the Christian groups are

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for non-ethnic Turkmen. For example, when Greater Grace Church, which has a congregation in Mary, sought permission from local authorities to hold a religious service in a small village not far from Mary, the officials asked "How many ethnic Russians are there?" The church leaders explained that their charter stated that anyone was welcome to join in church activities, but the officials denied approval for the event.

PLENTY OF ISSUES REMAIN...

16. (C) Security service officials sent Greater Grace Church a strong warning in June after a surprising turn of events. An official Azerbaijani delegation came to Ashgabat in late June, and a member of the delegation who ostensibly knew one of the church's members, visited the member and attended a service. When security officials learned of this, they detained the visitor and promptly deported him. The church's leader, Vladimir Tolmachev, said he disputed the officials' warning, saying neither he nor the church had invited the person or knew of the visit.

17. (C) All the churches continue to request permission to order religious literature from abroad, but it has proven extremely difficult to get permission, even for the registered groups. Representatives suggested to CRA this year that a Bible shop be opened, similar to those in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, but the idea was rejected. They have sought permission to provide religious instruction for children of members, and to open drug treatment centers, orphan and prisoner outreach programs, and Christian youth camps. However, they say the CRA seems opposed to anything that Islamic organizations do not also do. (COMMENT: The CRA may also be opposed to activities that it believes should be a state function, like caring for orphans. END COMMENT.) They also sought to assist an American medical charity organization come and open a free clinic in Turkmenistan, but because the organization is Christian, the CRA won't allow the group to come.

18. (C) Jehovah's Witness leader Andrei Zhbanov said that when he spoke to Gurbanov at the CRA, Gurbanov had criticized the group's charter text on public proselytization. Zhbanov said he challenges the prohibition on proselytizing by

referring to the Turkmen law and the constitution when he meets with Gurbanov and other Turkmen officials. He also believes that Gurbanov will obstruct the group's effort to get registered. (NOTE: Two Jehovah's Witnesses knocked on the door of an Embassy staffer a few days ago to offer to teach him about the faith and provide him with literature. When he declined, they offered to come back at a more convenient time. They apparently were going door-to-door in that apartment building. This is the boldest attempt post has heard here of Jehovah's Witnesses proselytizing activity, given the inherent danger in doing so. END NOTE.)

...BUT SOME PROGRESS NOTED

¶9. (C) Two representatives described several court cases that their members have brought against local authorities, who they alleged got their children expelled from school or tried to get members fired from jobs. Some of these court cases have had favorable outcomes, however, and allowed church members who have been cleared of false charges to return to school or work. One registered church leader said that his church had problems finding a facility to rent for church activities. Then a Ministry of Justice official visited him and encouraged him to sign an agreement to hold all church activities in one location. The church did so, and provided a schedule of church activities. The leader said that once this was done, things seemed to get much easier for the group, and it is expecting its first official foreign visitor before the end of August.

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¶10. (C) COMMENT: Some minority religious groups see some light at the end of the tunnel. We are continuing to hear fewer complaints of detentions and blatant harassment than in the past, although new cases occasionally surface. The Greater Grace Church incident may have reflected concerns that the Azeri visitor was doing more than simply attending a service, but even that incident does not appear to have made it more difficult for Greater Grace and its congregants to practice their faith. Changing traditional biases that compel government officials to obstruct ethnic Turkmen's religious choices, however, will take some time. END COMMENT.  
CURRAN